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THE *SCHWANRITTER-SCEAF* MYTH IN *PERCEVAL*
LE GALLOIS OU LE CONTE DU GRAAL

The *Perceval le Gallois ou le conte du Graal*¹ is assigned to the first of the sixteenth century, although an earlier manuscript from the opening of the thirteenth century is assumed to have been its source.² As the older manuscript exists only in very fragmentary form it is, of course, impossible to control its content, or to determine in what respects or in how far the later romance differs from its earlier prototype, except as concerns certain bits common to both. The older manuscript does not, however, offer anything bearing on that part of the later story which forms the basis of this discussion.³

The *Perceval le Gallois* is the conventional French romance of the holy grail, lacking on the one hand the freshness of Chrestien de Troyes, and on the other, the poetic grace of Wolfram von Eschenbach. There are, however, within the prosaic account certain unmistakable traces of beautiful and ancient Germanic conceptions of the *Gralparadies* and the *Schwanritter-Sceaf* hero said to have issued therefrom. Whether these features appeared in the original thirteenth-century version⁴ is, indeed, not material, since by the opening of that century the legend of the Swan Knight had secured firm root, although it had not yet been developed into the extended form in which it is told a century later.

In 1190 Johannis de Alta Silva in his *Dolopathos*⁴ tells us: "Hic est cygnus, de quo fama in eternum perseverat, quod cathena aurea militem in navicula trahat armatum." Wolfram writes in 1210:⁵

von Munsalvaesche wart gesant,
 der den der swane brâhte.

Helinandus is reported by Gert van der Schuren to have told

¹ *The High History of the Holy Grail, translated from the Old French by Sebastian Evans*, Everyman's Library, London and New York, 1913.

² *Ibid.*, p. xii.

³ *Ibid.*, pp. vi, vii.

⁴ Ed. Oesterley, p. 79.

⁵ *Parzival*, ed. Ernst Martin, vol. I, p. 292.

the story (1220) of how the knight Elyas came up the Rhine in a little boat drawn by a swan.⁶ It must also be borne in mind that Chrestien de Troyes, whose poem served as the background for French grail romance, knows nothing of the story of the Swan Knight as connected with the Grail, whereas Wolfram, otherwise leaning heavily on his illustrious predecessor for ideas, introduces the *Schwanritter* Lohengrin, as the *Grail-ritter*, beyond doubt from the background of his knowledge of Germanic tradition.⁷

The first of the striking passages in *Perceval le Gallois* occurs in Branch XII,⁸ where may be read: "He (King Arthur) rose and did on a great grey cape and issueth forth of the chamber and cometh to the windows of the hall that opened toward the sea, calm and untroubled, so that much pleasure had he of looking thereat and leaning at the windows. When he had been there a long space, he looked out to sea and saw coming afar off as it were the shining of a candle in the midst of the sea. Much he marvelled what it might be. He looked at it until he espied what seemed him to be a ship wherein was the light, and he was minded not to move until such time as he should know whether a ship it were or something other. The longer he looketh at it, the better he perceiveth that is a ship, and that it was coming with great rushing toward the castle as fast as it might. The King espieth it nigh at hand, but none seeth he within nor without save one old man, ancient and bald, of right passing seemliness that held the rudder of the ship. The ship was covered of a right rich cloth in the midst and the sail was lowered, for the sea was calm and quiet. The ship arrived under the palace and was quite still. When the ship had taken ground, the King looketh thereat with much marvelling, and knoweth not who is there within, for not a soul heareth he speak. Him thinketh that he will go see what is within the ship, and he issueth forth of the hall and cometh thither where the ship was arrived, but he might not come anigh for the flowing of the sea. 'Sir,' saith he that held the rudder, 'Allow me a little!' He launcheth forth of the ship a little boat

⁶ Cf. Blöte, "Der Clevische Schwanritter," *Zeitschrift für deutsches Altertum*, Vol. XLII, p. 5.

⁷ Cf. W. Golther, *Die Gralsage bei Wolfram von Eschenbach*, p. 23.

⁸ Evans, *op. cit.*, pp. 148 ff.

and the King entereth therein, and so cometh into the great ship, and findeth a knight, that lay all armed upon a table of ivory, and had set his shield at his head. At the head of his bed had he two tall twisted links of wax in two candlesticks of gold, and the like at his feet, and his hands were crossed upon his breast. The King draweth nigh toward him and so looketh at him, and seemed him that never had he seen so comely a knight. 'Sir,' saith the master of the ship, 'For God's sake draw you back and let the knight rest, for thereof hath he sore need.' 'Sir,' saith the King, 'Who is the knight?' 'Sir, this would he well tell you were he willing, but of me may you know it not.' 'Will he depart forthwith from hence?' saith the King. 'Sir,' saith the master, 'Not before he hath been in this hall, but he hath sore travail and therefore taketh rest,' . . . Thereupon behold you, the knight that cometh all armed and the master of the ship before him bearing the twisted link of wax in the candlestick of gold in front of him, and the knight held his sword all naked. . . . The King seeth that he beareth the red shield with the white hart whereof he had heard tell. The brachet that was in the hall heareth the knight. He cometh racing toward him and leapeth about his legs and maketh great joy of him. And the knight playeth with him, then taketh the shield that hung on the column, and hangeth the other there, and cometh back toward the door of the hall. 'Lady,' saith the King, 'Pray the knight that he go not so hastily!' 'Sir,' saith the Knight, 'No leisure have I to abide' . . . the King and Queen are right heavy of his departure, but they durst not press him beyond his will. He entered into the ship. . . . The master draweth the boat within, and so they depart and leave the castle behind. . . . Lancelot seeth the shield that he had left on the column, and knoweth it well, and saith, 'Now know I well that Perceval hath been here.' "

The significant points in the legend of the Knight of the Swan are, first, the waiting and watching person of royalty at the castle-window overlooking the water; second, the approaching boat, propelled by a strange and unusual force; third, the armed and sleeping knight with his shield at his head; fourth, the concealed identity of the knight; fifth, the leaving of certain of his knightly possessions behind; and, sixth, the knight's strange departure to the borne whence he had earlier come.

Nowhere is the story more beautifully told than by Konrad von Würzburg. After picturing the waiting maiden princess he writes:⁹

. ein wizer swan
flouc uf dēm wazzer dort hēr dan
und nâch im zôch ein schiffelîn
an einer ketene silberin.
diu lûter unde schône gleiz . . .
ein ritter in dēm schiffe slief,
dēr hēte sich dar in geleit,
dar über ein spalier was bekleit,
daz liechten schîn dēn ougen bar
von palmátsiden rôsenvar,
in dēm diu sunne spilte,
dēr helt ûz sime schilte
gemachet hēt ein küssîn
ûf dēm só lac daz houbet sîn
durch ruowe dâ besunder . . .
sîn hēlm, sîn halsbērc unde hosen
diu wāren nēben in geleit,
ēr hēte sîniu wāfenkleit
mit im gefüeret ûf dēn sē.
dēr swane wîz alsam dēr snē
fuorte an ime dēn swaeren soum . . .
'Hērre, ich mac wol trûrec sîn,'
sprach diu wërde herzogîn,
'ich hân von iu zwei schoeniu kint,
diu beidiu wol gerâten sint,
und ist verborgen mir dâ bî,
von waz geburt ēr komen sî,
dēr in ze vater ist gezelt' . . .
beliben wolde ēr dô niht mē,
wan ēr ilte schiere dan.
dēr selbe minnecliche swan,
dēr in hēte dar gezogen,
dēr quam aber dô geflogen . . .
ēr fuorte in balde ûf sîne vart
in eime schiffelîne kluoc.
daz sēlbe, daz in ē dar truoc,
daz wart in tragend aber sit . . .
dēr ritter edel unde hēr
fuor sîne strâze bî dēr zît,
noch quam ēr wider nimmer sit
ze kinde noch ze wibe.

⁹ Konrad von Würzburg, *Der Schwanritter*, ed. Roth, ll. 107-11, 116-125, 128-133, 1129-1135, 1280-84, 1286-89, 1306-09.

To which Wolfram's account adds:¹⁰

sîns kleinoetes er dâ liez
ein swert, ein horn, ein vingerlîn.
hin fuor Logengrîn.

With the story thus before us obvious and striking points of similarity between the *Schwanritter* myth and the quotation just given from *Perceval le Gallois* at once present themselves. The first point of similarity between the two accounts is the picture of the royal personage gazing from the window of a castle situated at the water's edge. The maiden princess of Nimaye sits looking out upon the Rhine:¹¹ "Also sat se to Nymeghe uppe der Borch, unde sach uth dem Venster in den Ryn." So Arthur finds "pleasure . . . of looking . . . and leaning at the windows as he gazed out over the sea." In both cases the significance is plain—a mortal looks expectantly across the unknown whence occasionally come strange visitants from the great beyond. If the likeness stopped here it might well be argued that this similarity was purely accidental, but step by step the parallel in the two accounts is maintained.

In the *Perceval le Gallois* we are told that the sea was "calm and untroubled" and that "the sail was lowered, for the sea was calm and quiet" and further that "none seeth he within nor without save one old man, ancient and bald . . . that held the rudder of the ship." But at the same time we are informed that the ship "was coming with great rushing . . . as fast as it might." What then is the strange means of propulsion? Like Coleridge's phantom bark,

Without a breeze, without a tide,
She steadies with upright keel!¹²

Of Scaef we read:¹³ "This Scaef, as they say, was brought to a certain Germanic island, called Scandea, when but a little boy. He was lying in a tiny boat *without oars*."¹⁴ The analogy is here plain. Some strange, supernatural power drives on the

¹⁰ *Op. cit.*, vol. I, p. 293.

¹¹ Caspar Abel, *Sammlung Eilicher noch nicht gedruckten Alten Chronicken*, Braunschweig, 1732, p. 55.

¹² Coleridge, *The rime of the Ancient Mariner*, XL.

¹³ J. M. Kemble, *A Translation of the Anglo-Saxon Poem of Beowulf*, London, 1837, p. iv.

¹⁴ Tennyson has made a striking adaptation of this idea in his account of the coming of Arthur, apparently desiring to introduce the logical complement to

boat bearing its burden from a transcendental other-world. And it is all one whether this power be unseen, as in the Sceaf myth and *Perceval le Gallois*, or romantically visualized as a beautiful swan, in the legend of the Low Countries. Konrad writes:¹⁵

. ein wizer swan
flouc uf dēm wazzer dort hēr dan
und nâch im zôch ein schiffeln
an einer ketene silberîn.

So indeed Venus Aphrodite was pictured by the ancients as drawn by swans in her passage from Olympus to the habitations of earth.

Within the ship "a knight lay . . . all armed . . . and had set his shield at his head." Konrad narrates that:¹⁶

ein ritter in dēm schiffe slief,
dēr hēte sich dar in geleit . . .
dēr helt ûz sîme schilte
gemachet hēt ein küssin
ûf dēm sô lac daz houbet sîn
durch ruowe dâ besunder.

As has already been established,¹⁷ this sleep in which the newly arriving knight finds himself is but a symbol of death or the transcendental world from which he is come. In still another

the well-known story of the passing of Arthur. In *The Coming of Arthur* we read:

Beheld, so high upon the dreary deeps
It seem'd in heaven, a ship, the shape thereof
A dragon wing'd, and all from stem to stern
Bright with a shining people on the deck,
And gone as soon as seen . . .
And down the wave and in the flame was borne
A naked babe . . .

Also in *Guinevere*:

For there was no man knew from whence he came;
But after tempest, when the long wave broke
All down the thundering shores of Bude and Bos,
There came a day as still as heaven, and then
They found a naked child upon the sands
Of dark Tintagil by the Cornish sea;
And that was Arthur.

¹⁵ *Loc. cit.*

¹⁶ *Loc. cit.*

¹⁷ Cf. W. Müller, *Germania*, vol. 1; P. S. Barto, *Tannhäuser and the Mountain of Venus*, p. 64 f.

account we read indeed:¹⁸ "Hie furet ein swan ein schiffelin uber mer zu kunic artus hofe und einen *toten* ritter drinne." We are told of Scaef that "he was discovered by the people asleep with his head resting upon a sheaf of wheat."¹⁹ To this day it is still customary in certain German localities to lay on the coffin of the dead a tiny *Weizengarbe* or sheaf of wheat, as a symbol of the place to which the departed has returned. The fact that the sleep of the knight in the *Perceval le Gallois* symbolizes this transcendental origin and that the picture is a borrowing from the ancient Germanic myth finds added confirmation from the circumstance that "at the head of his bed had he two tall twisted links of wax in two candlesticks of gold, and the like at his feet, and his hands were crossed upon his breast" and that he "lay . . . upon a table of ivory." The knight is here laid out after the fashion of a corpse, although he is but sleeping. In both the *Perceval le Gallois* and the account of the Swan Knight emphasis is laid on the fact that the knight comes all armed²⁰ and particularly on the fact that the knight has his shield at his head. So Konrad:²¹

dër helt ûz sîme schilte
gemachet hêt ein küssîn.

The identity of the knight in *Perceval le Gallois* is concealed, although, to be sure, we are later told that he is Perceval: "‘Sir,’ saith the King, ‘who is the knight?’ ‘Sir, this would he tell you *were he willing*, but of me may you not know it.’" Nor is the identity disclosed until the knight has come and gone. This is a parallel of the Swan Knight legend, where, too, an unknown knight appears and expressly forbids any inquiry as to his name or origin. In *Parzival*:²²

dô sprach er ‘frouwe herzogin, . . .
nu hoeret wes i’ uch biten wil.
gevrâget nimmer wer ich sî:
sô mag ich iu beliben bî.
bin ich ziwerr vrâge erkorn,
sô habt ir minne an mir verlorn.

¹⁸ H. A. Keller, *Romvart; beiträge zur Kunde mittelalterlicher dichtung aus italienischen Bibliotheken*, Mannheim, 1844, p. 670.

¹⁹ Kemble, *op. cit.* p. iv.

²⁰ "militem armatum," Johannis de Alta Silva, *loc. cit.*

²¹ *Loc. cit.*

²² *Loc. cit.*

In *Lohengrin*:²³

er sprach 'Juncvrouwe, mac iuwer munt
vermiden des des ich iuch wise hie zo stunt,
sô muget ir mich mit freuden haben lange,
Tuot ir des niht, ir vlieset mich.

The *Schwanritter*, furthermore, departs immediately, in some accounts with a magical suddenness, when questioned as to his origin:

Beliben wolde er do niht me,
wan er ilte schiere dan.²⁴

In *Parzival*:²⁵

daz in ir vrâge dan vertreip . . .
nu brâht im aber sîn friunt der swan
ein kleine gefüege seitiez.

Abel's *Chronik*:²⁶ "So fro alse se dusse Worde sede, da vorloss se one uth dem Bedde, dat se nicht en wuste, wur dat he bleff." In the *Perceval le Gallois* the same idea of impending recognition and consequent departure seems to lie, for we read that the king recognizes the shield which Perceval carries, and that the brachet is overjoyed at seeing him, and that the knight forthwith departs, despite the importunities of the king and the queen that he remain. "The King seeth that he beareth the red shield with the white hart whereof he had heard tell. The brachet that was in the hall heareth the knight. He cometh racing toward him and leapeth about his legs and maketh great joy of him. And the knight playeth with him, then taketh the shield that hung on the column, and hangeth the other there, and cometh back toward the door of the hall. 'Lady', saith the King, 'Pray the knight that he go not so hastily!' 'Sir,' saith the knight, 'No leisure have I to abide.'" In both accounts, therefore, the knight comes and goes unrecognized.

As the knight in *Perceval le Gallois* leaves behind his shield, so in the *Schwanritter* story Lohengrin:²⁷

. dâ liez
ein swert, ein horn, ein vingerlîn.

²³ Ed. Rückert, ll. 2268-71.

²⁴ Konrad von Würzburg, *loc. cit.*

²⁵ *Loc. cit.*

²⁶ *Op. cit.*, p. 56.

²⁷ *Parzival*, *loc. cit.*

The knight of whom the story is here told is Perceval, not Lohengrin, but it is still a knight of the grail who comes in this strange way—another evidence of Germanic origin, since Wolfram is the first one to connect *Gral* and *Schwanritter*. In *Lohengrin* we are told:²⁸

. hoch ein gebirge lit
in der innern Indiâ, daz ist niht wît.
den grâl mit al den helden ez besliuzet
die Artûs prâht mit im dar.

And one the Minnesinger:²⁹

Wa kam hin Parcivale,
ris' Sigenot unt der wild' man?
Sie kerte (n) ze dem Grale,
der tot hat si erstichen . . .
man vûnde noch wol Parcival
und alle herren in dem Gral.

The *Wartburgkrieg* pictures Arthur as living a transcendental life in a hollow mountain, with his heroes of the Round Table, and adds:³⁰

Artûs hât kempfen ûz gesant,
sît er von diser welte schiet, in Kristen lant.

Abel's *Chronik* states that "Helias (the Swan Knight) sy gekomen uthe dem Berghe, dar Venus in den Grale iss."³¹

The solitary helmsman in the *Perceval le Gallois* would seem to correspond in part to the swan of the Germanic tale and is no doubt the same as *der treue Eckart* of the Tannhäuser legend, and Othinn of the Norse. In the Edda we read of the boatman and his skiff awaiting the dead body of Sigmund's son,³² and of the golden ship in which Odin carries those fallen in battle from Bravalla to Valhall.³³ As the swan skillfully guides the little boat to the landing, serving all the journey through as the pilot, so the old man in the *Perceval le Gallois* is the sole guide and guard of the sleeping Perceval.

²⁸ *Op. cit.*, lines 7141–45.

²⁹ von der Hagen, *Minnesinger*, vol. III, pp. 376, 150, 151.

³⁰ Ed. Simrock, stanza 89.

³¹ *Loc. cit.*

³² Cf. Grimm, *Mythologie*, 4th ed., Vol. II, p. 693.

³³ Grimm, *loc. cit.*

Perceval le Gallois contains another important passage which is likewise a patent borrowing from the same source as the one earlier cited. "Perceval heard one day a bell sound loud and high without the manor toward the sea. He came to the windows of the hall and saw the ship come with the white sail and the Red Cross thereon, and within were the fairest folk that ever he might behold, and they were all robed in such manner as though they would sing mass. When the ship was anchored under the hall they went to pray in the most holy chapel. . . . The ship wherein Perceval was drew far away, and a Voice that issued from the manor as she departed commended them to God and to His sweet Mother. Josephus recordeth us that Perceval departed in such wise, nor never thereafter did no earthly man know what became of him, nor doth history speak of him more."³⁴ What we have here is again simply the departure of the *Sceaf-Schwanritter* hero. Sceaf's departure is thus described:³⁵ "At the appointed time he died . . . and then his comrades bore him out to the shore of the sea. . . . There upon the beach stood the ring-prowed ship . . . ready to set out. . . . They laid down their dear prince . . . furnished . . . not less with mighty wealth than he had been by those who in the beginning had sent him forth. . . . Men know not in sooth to say . . . who received the freight." So Arthur, in a later account, is said to have been carried off to the paradisial Avalon in a boat filled with beautiful women, and of the Swan Knight it is told us repeatedly that after the asking of the fatal question he was borne away in the same boat in which he had come, and was never seen nor heard of more.³⁶

. Nû quam mit île
Uf einem schif sîn vriunt der swan . . .
hin mit dem swan sus vuor der Antschouvine.

As the final point of striking similarity between the *Perceval le Gallois* account and the legend of the Knight of the Swan from the grail paradise must be mentioned the reference to the bell which sounded "loud and high without the manor toward

³⁴ *Op. cit.*, Branch XXXV, Title XXVII.

³⁵ Kemble, *op. cit.*, pp. 2-3.

³⁶ Maynadier, *The Arthur of the English Poets*, p. 57; *Lohengrin*, lines 7220-21, 7230.

the sea." This mysterious bell is a frequent symbol of the transcendental grail paradise, being the means whereby the heroes of that spot are called to and from the place. It is the bell of the *Gralburg*, the bell which the knights of the grail in *Parzival* hear ringing far off on Munsalvaesche. So in the *Wartburgkrieg*:³⁷

Hört, wie die selben botschaft eine glocke
 Wol über tûsent raste warp
 dâ von ein hôher grêve sit in kampfê starp . . .
 Hört, wie es umbe die glocke stât; Artûses klingsaere,
 die muosten lân ir künste schal
 die selbe glocke in allen durch ôren hal.

And Perceval, the great knight of the grail, is, like the rest who are said to have their abode in the grail paradise, summoned thither by this strange messenger, first introduced into the literature of the grail by Wolfram von Eschenbach.

In view of the points of striking similarity between the passages cited from the *Perceval le Gallois* and the myth of the Swan Knight and that of Sceaf, as well as in view of the fact that the French romance is so late in the form in which we know it, whereas notable literary monuments of Germanic origin, dating even back of the lost manuscript on which the later romance is said to be based, contain the legend, we are forced to conclude that in an attempt to furnish what might be termed an eclectic version of the grail romance the author of *Perceval le Gallois* has not been averse to borrowing from the abundant storehouse of Germanic mythology one of its most beautiful gems.

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³⁷ *Op. cit.*, stanza 91.